Michelangelo according to his poems

An article by Thomas Mann, by the title *Michelangelo in seinen Dichtungen*, originally published January 1950 in the Swiss cultural magazine *Du*, erstwhile purchasable at 2,8 francs apiece, now translated into English by Héctor Tormos

The poetic oeuvre of – as ‘tis written on the cover[1]– ‘Michael Angelus Bonarotas’, whose original is laid out next to the German translation, has seized me by the zeal therein, and oft dire force of its feelings, deeply.

‘Tis wild poetwort – for inasmuch the shank of the sonnet is preserved, we time and again have to deal with the spurs of smart, sourness, love and misery of an ample, overcrowed soul suffering through beauty, striving to God mid verses. A curtate question posing as well as lovelament (‘*Come può esser ch’io non sia più mio?’* ‘How come I am not myself anymore?’) should ere be considered a sigh, a moan, than a poem, more so when ‘tis followed by the aghast cry *‘O Dio, o Dio, o Dio!’* ‘O God, O God, O God!’ covering the next two lines. Yet, the lone confessions of such a powerful artist are, through stirred-up feelings, entrancingly helled in a manner which almost escapes both art and culture leaving left for our wit just man, naked. And we ought concede that the translator has approached, with unusual and compassionate clout, the beauty of language within to the nearest.

How passion here, as sign of beastly and pained vigour, becomes words aheap! He, ‘turned in full into art’, born to it and ‘to be blazed by it the way love’s flint is known to set things ablaze’, spits political anger and grieve in sonnetshape, muses suicide as answer to the fall of the Medici’s dictatorship in the Republic of Florence feeling ‘distraught by misery, slavery’. He curses Florence, Dante’s and his ‘nest’, for unappreciating, scorning, harming its boundlessly praised poets up to their exile. Hereat beats the translation in laconic tone, the tone of a Germangrouch ranting, the tone that is to Michelangelo’s poetry most fitting:

> O how easier to besmear the folks by him repressed
> Than with praise to reach the den of Dante.

The dour plaint against Pope Julius II, to whom he alloted trust and hassle, decries thanklessness and not having received an ‘ounce of care’ – ‘*del mio tempo non ti incresce o dole!’* ‘You piss on the passing of my days and evil is the world Godforlorn. Will our toil’s reward be the fruit of a fruitless tree?’ – but rather made of his papal estate ‘a banner of war and death, plunderer of all sanctity’. Whence Michelangelo, Christian as he is and devout, become wan and wasted, to the might of God commends: ‘Heaven, whose access I by this my way of dearth have attained.’ Heaven, yes, and not Earth, for he ‘disdains lending inwit out to the world’.

And on he goes to collect with stark arms and sad fruits of the fruitless tree! He writes *‘La mia allegrezz’ è la malinconia’* (‘My gladness is glum’) and we read further in awe how yearning in another sonnet, mayhaps crafted by the scaffold wherewith was painted ‘The Last Judgment’, he lofes the night: ‘the fair image of death’ and ill haven of soughs. Such a taut itch, is it a will to sleep, not hearing and not seeing, *from* the world? To be stone and not man obliged ‘to last and

1 *Michelangelo: Dichtungen,* by Hans Mühlestein, from the Quos-Ego Publishing House in Celerina

overlast the pains' – or is it rather catalyst of zestful productivity, abrim overbearingness signifier of dark, beyond whatsoever mass can measure? And why should they so be? And wherefrom lifewoes constantly assailing a creator blessed by Heaven with artistic powers sublime? I deem it an urge warring and mammoth of he who takes up a fight with the pure and the soul and the godly willing to explain for a transcending ever. He writes: 'from the basest guides me to the abode loftiest my wish, the dreamsteered.' Such a wish is *love* not prone to die with the flesh and having art, heartbeating beauty and *humanitas* for sustenance – 'tis eked out endurance of torturous perduration such as found in other forces of nature, hardnosed yet sensitive and O so scarce, that we call Goethe, Tolstoi...

Most, almost all, poems by Michelangelo are lovesongs and encompass decades from ca. 1504 to the second half of the century. He is always in love, entrenched in pathos, undergoing the powerful one's decay (ie, impervious to age), spotting the human countenance for allure, for a glaringface between the young or a prancingface of a madam, moved much upon *'la forza d'un bel viso'* ('The power of a neatmien'), whose everquick response he as the one and only worldly joy attainable by him lauds, a *mercy* transposable from the physical beauty to the spiritual merrying him – albeit always betwixt imprecations and gripes against God's love's cruelty – as merriest.

'How is it that I lose myself?' is the clinging question of he who, since 1546 if not earlier, with ill and wornlooking limbs, is exiting Earth, of he whose lovepains and lust have oft (and is in such a hailing way expressed!) his 'loins spurred'. Yet sights he no end. Although at some point he questions airily his selfesteem:

I grow the more dear, I wax my worth the most,
When I become interested in myself.

and placing on the twin trays of balance selfesteem and love for mortification the torque leans madnessward.

And when 'beauty' comes, heralded by a charming face carrying ineffable errand, come again the eyes: *'Occhi mia vita'* ('The dearing waving of the eyelash' as the translation commendably puts it) which entrance him in spades.

La memoria degli occhi e la speranza,
Per cui non sol son vivo, ma beato…
O Dio, e son pur begli!

The remembrance of the eyes is hope
And she for whom I live and reach to orison…
O God, how pierce they me in lure!

And come ever again the eyes in eidos of platonizing erotism and play primarily the role of usherettes, amorous and ardent, of spirit and sense and senselessness up to the exhaustion of Buonarroti. The remotest star plants finally its bright seed in Earth so Earthlings may call it *love*. 'Tis this star that suffers the *passio* in the spirit's *via crucis* as much as 'tis Peter on Heaven's door letting souls in. Thus Michelango disdains those for whom beauty and passion are but *of the senses,* the likes of a Tomasso Cavalieri who went to the extent of calling him 'an uncouth asshat'. For Michelango the soul is an immortal and angelic transcender of bodies, of which enthusiastically says: 'Thou hast my body inflamed not sheerly by fairglance' – '*il tuo volto sereno'.* For love, if valiant, does not place hope on things – that could fall apart – whenever it manifests, nor seeks God's grace in eonian beauty and boon to practice echter devotion kneeling down in front of Him as clay.

We either covet shame for truth or rather say: 'I do not believe in this sincere display of love of him'.

And when I am dead, I am dead for beauty –

That is what we readers hither and thither perceive, superbly expressed, crooned, as part of Michelangelo's affirming faith in the immortality of passion and his work, of no shorter duration. With insight, still, eerily common, habitual, tranquilizingly human, devoted to supreme beauty and – amid transience – the unforgettable glimpses thereof. Thus must have been a daring task for him to bind platonism, beauty as sheath of what is godly, and carnality as parable for the love of God, all three while in his mind the sensual is crass loss, snare debaser of human condition.

And there is that woman as well, called *'La Donna bella e crudele'* ('the Lady sheen and grim'), for whom, for whose 'paganly attractive sweet carcass' of value 'weighed and found wanting', hankers he. Sinning with her and go to Hell instead of Heaven where (scripsit) 'I belong' is a consuming heathen and impious thought. Sad!

Were I to know thy pondering true
My rue might pine me more.

Forsooth. And despite knowing that beauty is mostly cozenage, and the mirk abyss to which it leads eyes and soul, he does but to implore: 'I want me a nice gull! May earnest love aspire to that just hinted by the lovers' countenance! I want the cheat and to enjoy it!' Such womanly eyes (eyes again…) strayed he the way of Paradise, but however mean, kittenish, heartless she may be, if sent from Heaven, why should charm be a human hap?

O doloured heart unbridled by feelings! I know not about Tommaso Cavalieri, his patron for a decade and perhaps already studied by scholars, yet he appears as a young noble or patrician to me and is called by Michelangelo *'Signior mio'* ('My sir') and *'Signior mio caro'* ('My dear sir') not in hackneyed address only, but in endearment too. At 58 and wilted by plod, the artist dares deeming it more than possible that Cavalieri's spirit 'arrives to meet and feel the candor which burns in mine in sympathy and, *maybe, enkindles it*'. But Michelangelo never kenned enkindling for its own sake, nor he wanted to, nor could he. For him love, as platonism goes, is deific nous in a lover's body and touches the beloved's not, for the latter is but a means for zeal, and how much as zealot Michelangelo longs for the heavenly and bilking day, the day avowed wherein the sun's old ferd stops and he, unmerited, unmerited! hugs his 'yearned-for sir' is not else than chimera. The kindling, and the erotic for him whole, crops up of the contrast between beauty and gray age out of which love is momentary mender of ruth, if at all there.

Almost all poems here are of the late Michelangelo, some well into his seventh decade, whereunder by reason of grossness of oldage he gives up on him and hoises the lief upper. To Cavalieri anent the *Donna crudele* confesses a single solace left: that in his soul's and body's darknight she may make him mad and serve as personal sun, as cohort granted from birth onwards – *dato al nascer per compagno*.

The most fortunate of love undoubtedly alighted in him via Vittoria Colonna, a poetess serious and aloof, in their twelve-years soulmating (since his sixties to her death in 1547). As an ethereal path for knowledge such a bond reminds us of Goethe and Frau von Stein, of how he wrote sonnetly about having born twice, first as mere model in shoddy clay, then rebirthed in rock hail and only through humbling, taming work, once rawness and profuseness shed, made good self. Who in Weimar was vernal and pliant, in meeting lofting womandeed, bred the 'Notte' in the Medici Chapel, the 'David' and even the 'Last Judgment' in which a codger looks daftly back at us, quixotically, not real. Michelangelo's poetic oeuvre revels withal the rapture for a woman 'of no macule at all', a penchant noble and coy squiring him in elation towards a coupling of the senses not the way of Earth but, as longed for by his keensense, heavenward.

The more he roves and self-hates, the more with hopes scoots he towards her, 'the keeper of my frets all' – 'O were I let to reach Heaven, Heaven as promises your face, face as pledged by how pious and feal thine eyes are!' The eyes… 'Hailful', *'pien d'ogni salute'*. He must see her and cannot see her enough and woe whenever he does not! But if they tryst too seldom or never again,

then he ‘almost forgets’. Almost? Yes, if they are not to reunite, the absence and lack of sensual perception *is* forgotten and he brooks, e.g. while Vittoria practices ascetism in the cloister of Viterbo, the ailing barrenness of imagination up until the ug returns and lusts just once, more, anon, the ogling of her face. Barrenness however means contempt, forgetfulness, a demise for sentience, thence he thigs to distant saints to, were it within their realm, make of his entire body *in perpetuum* but an eye – *del mio corpo tutto un occhio solo* – to eye.

As much as pulchritude adds to pain, as what abstruse seclusion into pep partakes, cop these poems. These, the most inspired hoard of artthoughts ever sired, bound and tangle with a darling amaranthinely fairing up, howbeit, self-determination: ‘the very keeper of unkempt time’ is life the evers-maker, avenger of fortune, prowler of hours, hatcher of wombs. He who wrang with marble is aware of work as besieger of time and death. In him as in Goethe art along with nature and nature’s son the artist give to the passing eternal pause. The passing, thanks to them, will have millenia from now witness contemporary. ‘How you were fair and foul I was, yet ’twas no tomfoolery what I felt for you my love.’ And the following I will hark so long as life lasts:

All the new old things
We belatedly grip and are soon forced to release.

That we, after pry and pondering aplenty, achieve new better things and thereupon die. Such he reaches 68 in 1543 and maybe – teeming with hustle and hoar malaise – his poem the loftiest: erred Nature and reeled and erred ‘till She achieved you face’, upon which endeth Her travail and bent, aged, died. Nothing is more deeply addle or sacredly in angst than his gazing of her face, for thereat fuse attainment and urge at the obit of the world.

When Vittoria perishes ‘tis the immortality she confided her life to that he, the timeagog, assuages with. He essays to forget now that he cannot regard her and regardless recollection still brings the authoress of ‘dainty, gallant and hallowed poems’. Had these – the pang of separation, the oaths of loyalty, the ebbing of endurance afar from his wiles – not taught him, worn but staunch, to avaunt in front of death? A lover like him loves love over whoever beloved. With heled coals ablush, pilfered from the sky’s great pyre as it downhilled, he compares himself. He is not ash, he is embers ruddy, he glows and cinches that love ‘along with other logs’ will pad the fire in him so tight that a spark will not dare athwart hop.

At 72 he verily thinks about new love, yens, expects. Not to wander then, and more so if ‘embers cook youth out of the old’, he after Vittoria loved on and again: Tomassos, *donne crudeli,* crones and, chiefly, beings whose male or female face wed the sublime traits seen in his Colonna sketches, soulful, eyed so comely they nigh cleft the page and of lips firm. He will never, not in paintings nor in poems, waive the erotic he bides with, the sublimated nub of excruciating sense.

‘Tis tasseled rhetoric, not acumen, which leads him to call in verse love ‘a doppelganger, an extracorporeal twinger of bodies’, to carp how the charred log of his heart, ever in a glut of smoldering and tears, may begin anew.

Once, O frail lovecoppe, more
Thou surmise to see i’the snarl of angst
Me, the foxy and yet inept to escape

When he a fox? Love, whose turf he dwells if possible ‘from dusk till dawn’, is not a doppelganger to nix, but a ganger of him, of fame equal to his, somewhen ambrosial, elsewhen venereal, to part ways with only after Michelango becomes, of the world, departed.

Aye, lost he is in misery of waning days and lusted art, held once ‘in high regard’, tipping him to pauperism in senectude effete and fallow.

Why a puppeteer of chisel and throe
Be when I tast’d the brack already

And I soonest should souse in and pant not

This he writes in a late eerie pitiable poem in Macel de'Corvi, his lair in Rome, which he describes as a shack full of feces and carrion warmed by urine oozing where he attempts, as crank spook of his former self, whooping oodles in wheezing catarrhy, to sleep. Sleepless therein he spends nights and days victim of tinnitus. He avers: 'the blaze that in my heart was fain is now ash'. All the welting evils yon into his wizening body can at last in come. He, having had ache as portrait of love for long, as affliction, as candied poison, schemed the loveliest of sufferances. Love was there in his each and every creation as an invisible plinth inspiring, stirring, rearing his art towards suprahuman avail as it did, immortally, in St. Peter's, whose dome, 'tis told, Cavalieri –the man he depicted with a smile androgynous for it had Vittoria's lips – praised longly.

The concourse of rot, beauty, being in love and being productive he knew and brewed so savvily into art that it arrives translated to us still pure. I, vouching for his poetry rather than his painting, have brushed myself the heart the color of his verse:

Nel vostro fiato son le mie parole
You speak my words and them breath